

Making a Difference:

Sustainability for Graphic Designers

Graphic Design 2026

The Impact of Our Work

We are in the business of creating. Our work exists on paper, using inks, printed using huge machines and transported around the world. Even our digital work requires electrical energy to view it.

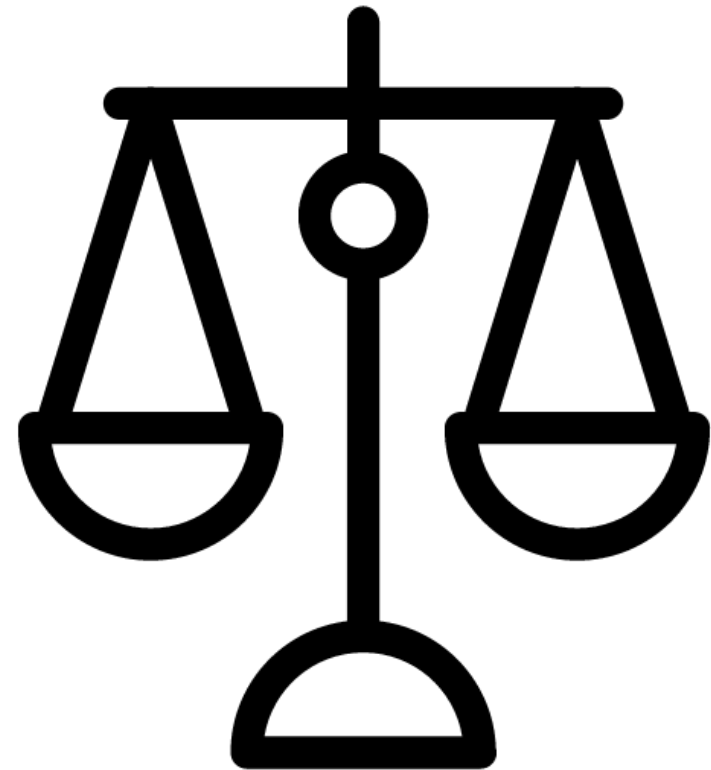
Everything we do has an impact and uses resources. How can we as the creative help manage this?

What do I need to do to enable my design to be 'sustainable'?

‘Sustainable’

Think of this like scales.
Negative Material Impact
vs Positive Social Impact

For a piece of design to be ‘sustainable’, all that has to happen is for the impact scale to tip. If the book impacts upon the user, ending in positive change for example, the negative environmental impacts (in theory!) would be outweighed.



The Impacts of Printed Matter

We rely on a number of resources, such as energy, water, paper, inks, solvents and packaging to enable and facilitate the work we do.



trees cut
down



shipped to
paper mill



turned into paper
using machinery and
chemicals



shipped
out to
printers



ink and
machinery
to print



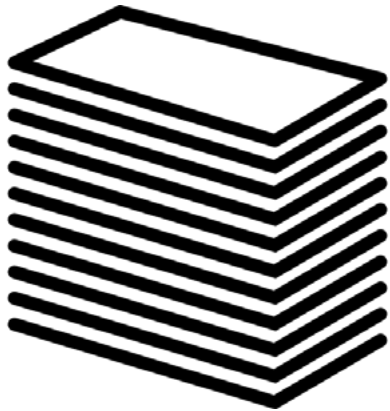
cut to size



waste
dumped

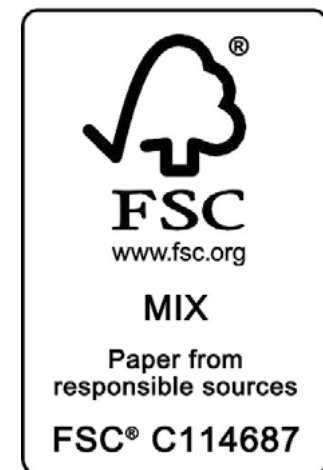
Paper

A material we rely on hugely.
Whats even in it?



- Fibers from Wood & Grasses
- Clay to fill and bind it
- Chalk to give smooth surface
- Bleach to colour white

Look for these
Logos:



Inks & Toners

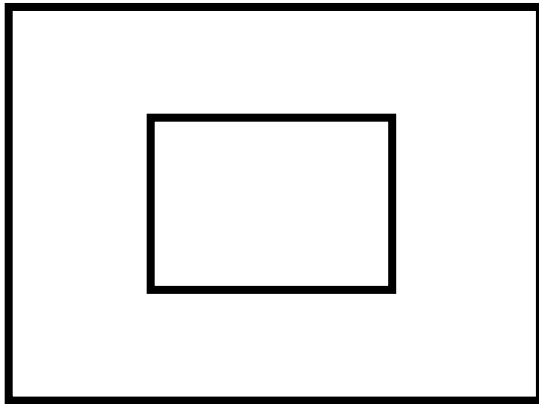
The main ingredient of printing ink is most commonly oil. This is then mixed with varnish, resin, and wax to form a base - which colour pigments are then added to.

Toner is between 80 and 90% plastic.

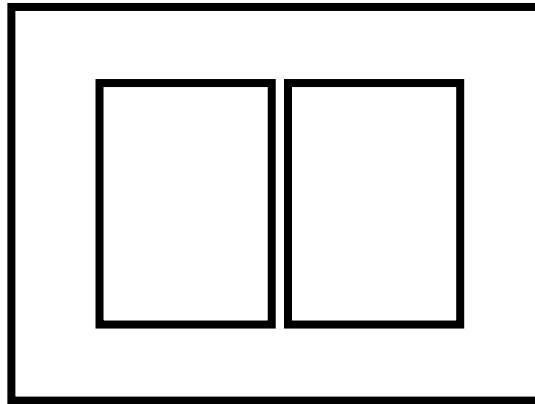
There are lots of alternatives to these which are more sustainable, and print companies are gradually offering them. Riso inks for example are soy based.

Design Smart

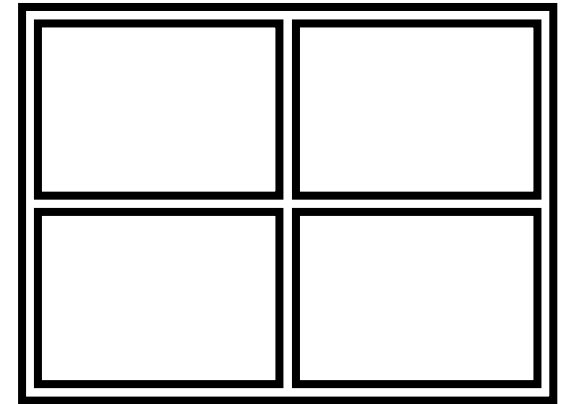
Small changes like how we set up our documents can add together to make a huge difference.



'1 Up'



'2 Up'



'4 Up'

The Litho Printing Process

We often hit 'print' and don't think about what happens next.

There are two main methods of printing; the first is Litho Printing.



The full process is explained here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LMU-zB8Sro>

One Poster

A single poster printed using Litho would require:

- 4 Large Sheets of Metal
- Etching lasers and Chemicals
- 4 ink layers, predominantly oil based
- The electrical power required to run the press
- The large sheets or rolls of paper
- Cleaning Chemicals

Lithographic printing is very cheap, which is why it is still the go-to method. The costs are in the setup, but once the job is running, the price per copy is tiny. This often results in over ordering.

New Digital Technology

Leaps forward in technology are really helping turn this around. On a digital press, there are no printing plates - files are sent directly to the machine.

There is no setup, therefore you can order the number of copies you actually need, or even better, print to order.

Variable Data Printing

This allows designers the ability to create artwork that speaks directly to the end user.

Instead of producing 10,000 copies of a single document, delivering a single message to 10,000 customers, variable data printing could print 10,000 unique documents with customized messages for each customer.

For instance, 10,000 people could sign up to a magazine subscription, and each copy could be custom printed, with their name on the cover.

ED SPORTSWEAR
PACED SPORTSWEAR



SEMI-ANNUAL SALE

KEVIN,

FIND THE PERFECT ALL-WEATHER
TO GO WITH YOUR NEW RUNNING S

40% OFF

ANY FULL PRICE ITEM WITH
PURCHASE OF \$50 OR MORE

BUY

GET 2 PACE
HOODIES FOR

SEMI-ANNUAL SALE

SPENCER,

FIND THE PERFECT ALL-TRAIL GEAR
TO GO WITH YOUR NEW MOUNTAIN BIKE

40% OFF

ANY FULL PRICE ITEM WITH
PURCHASE OF \$50 OR MORE

BUY

Design for Screen

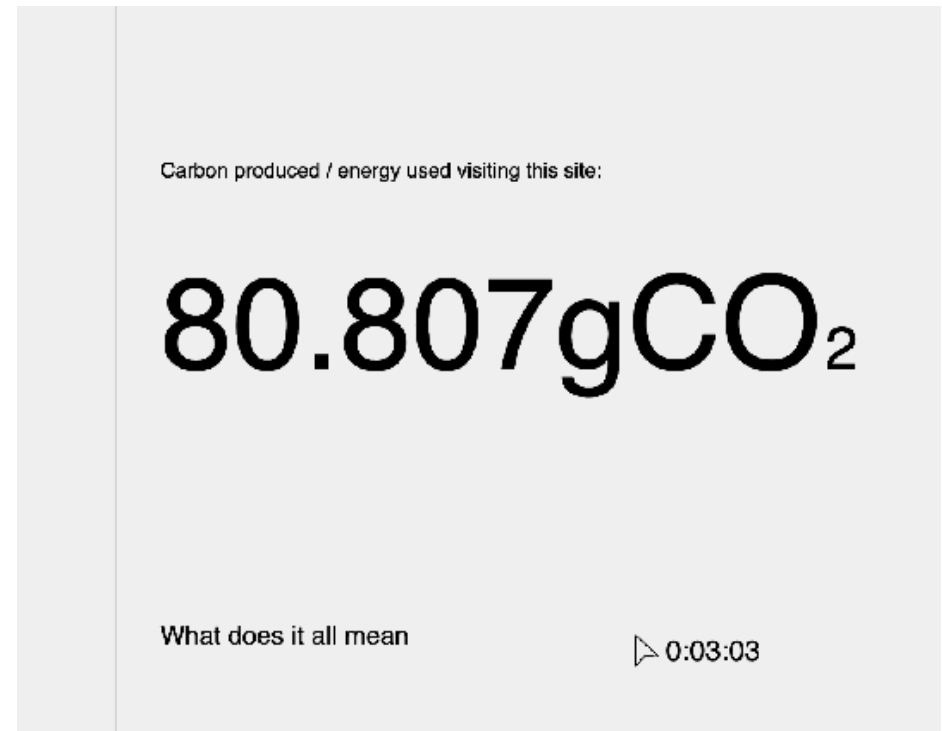
Perhaps we could be forgiven for making the assumption that avoiding print is instantly more sustainable.

The most obvious impact of screen-based design is a hike in electrical use. But for a piece of design to be truly 'sustainable', it has to deliver its message as effectively as it can. How many ads or messages do you scroll past on a daily basis? How many do we actually stop and engage with?



Drawing attention to the issue of energy

Without Form has recently launched a vision for a new way of browsing the web. Its manifesto draws attention to energy consumption, and forces the user to make choices, based on how they want to interact with the site.

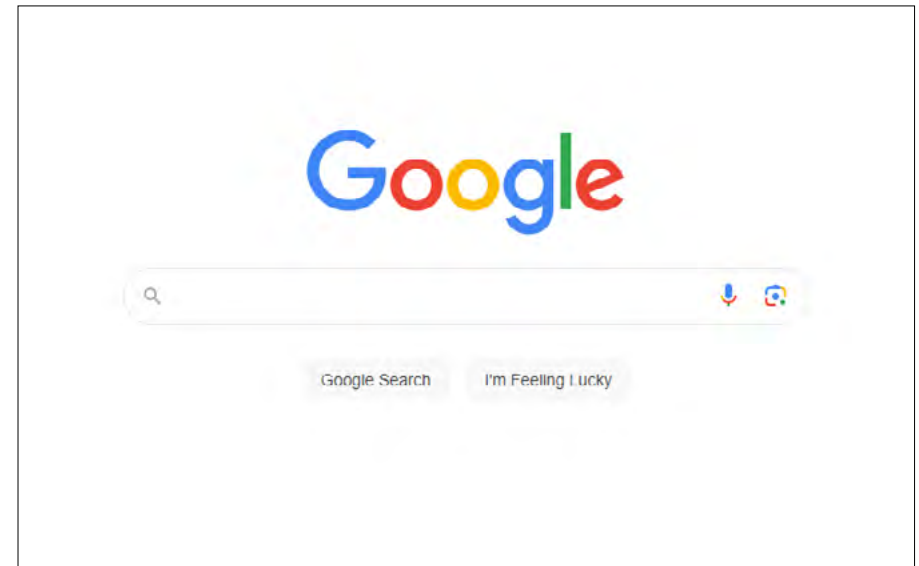


Design Choices

It is estimated that a single google search uses enough power to light a lightbulb for an hour.

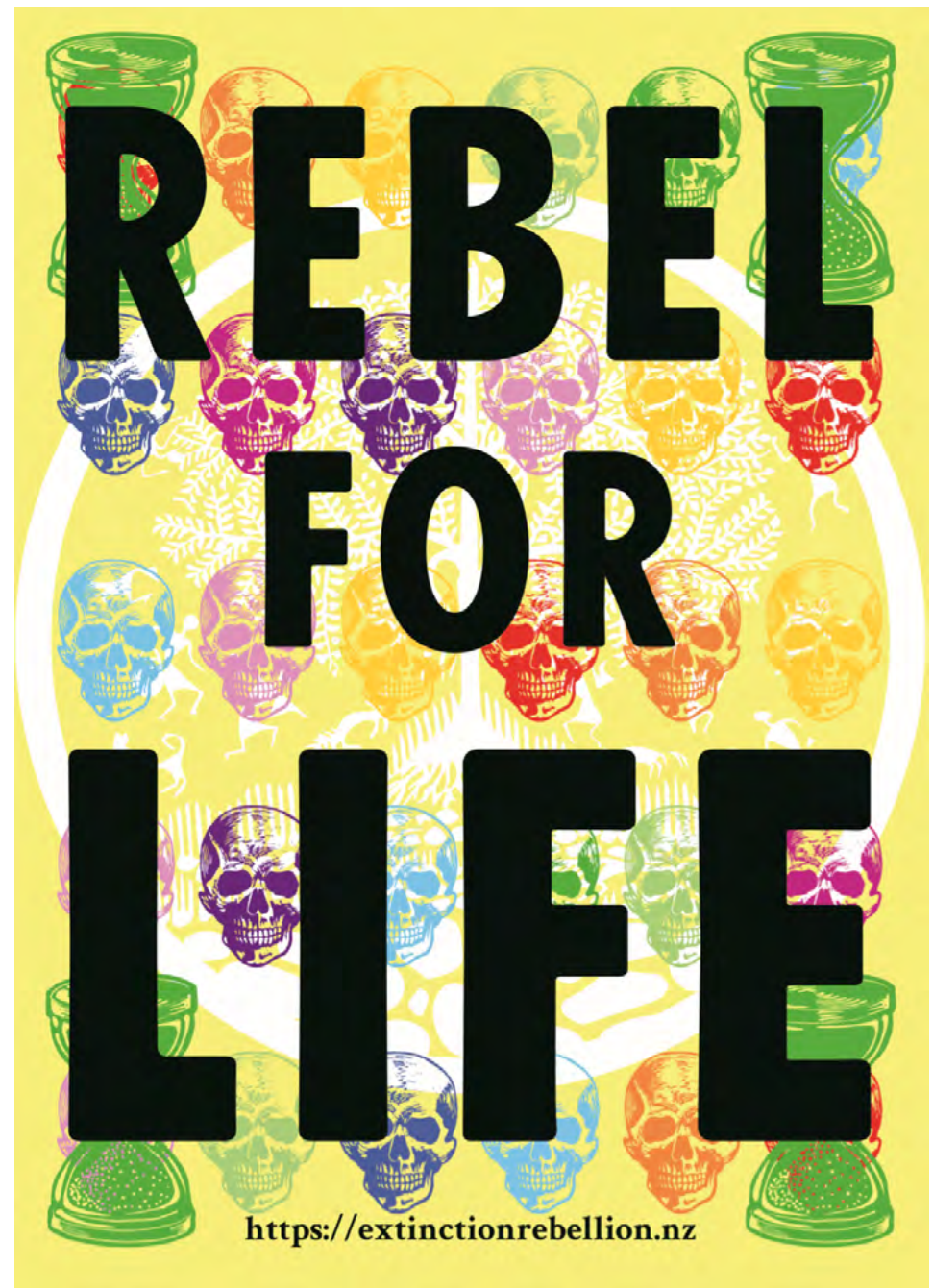
This simple design solution saves energy by turning your google search background black. This cuts down on backlighting your screen.

The same concept can ofcourse be applied to print. Fewer heavy areas of colour - cuts down on ink use.



Ensure Longevity

Could your solution be designed to last, or have great aesthetic value so that it will be kept instead of being thrown away?



WHAT IS FOOD WASTE

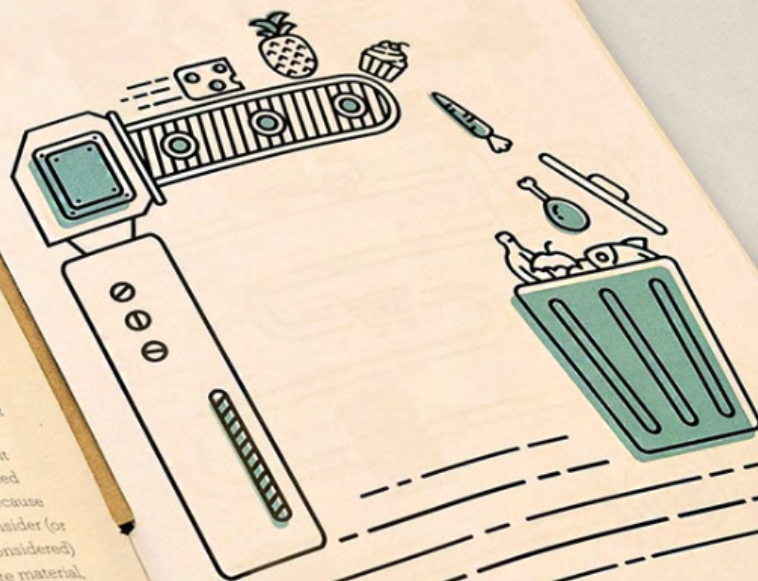
Wasting food is not only an ethical and economic issue but it also depletes the environment of limited natural resources.

Food waste or food loss is food that is discarded or lost uneaten. Current estimates put global food loss and waste between one-third and one-half of all food produced.

Loss and wastage occurs at all stages of the food supply chain or value chain. In low-income countries, most loss occurs during production, while in developed countries much food – about 100 kilograms (220 lb) per person per year – is wasted at the consumption

stage. Definitions of food waste vary, among other things, in what food waste consists of, how it is produced, and where or what it is discarded from or generated by. Definitions also vary because certain groups do not consider (or have traditionally not considered) food waste to be a waste material, due to its applications.

Some definitions of what food waste consists of are based on other waste definitions.



This is the START of a conversation, and a way of working.

You are not required to engage with big production runs for this project, but much of this information is useful for the future.

Perhaps though there are factors you could consider during this project?

The biggest and most important factor when considering sustainability is to ask: will this work?
Will it inform effectively, will it change perceptions?
Will the audience learn something, or take action?